

Culture, Ethnicity and Politics—Twisted Links

BY SHARON F. GRIFFIN

DURBAN, South Africa

September 1995

In the new South Africa the king of the Zulus, Goodwill Zwelithini, sees himself as monarch over all racial groups within the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Consequently, the king decided to make this year's annual Reed Dance ceremony a multicultural affair. So although traditionally for Zulu maidens, the Sept. 2, 1995 Reed Dance at the king's Enyokeni Palace in Nongoma included performances by Indian, white and coloured (mixed ancestry) girls, as well as performances by young girls from other ethnic groups, such as the Ndebele.

Nongoma, which means "mother of songs," is about 310 miles north of Durban in central Zululand. Established in 1887, it was once the homestead of King Zwide, the chief of the powerful Ndwandwe people. Its establishment between the two warring factions of the Zulu nation, the uSuthu and the Mandlakazi, was intended to bring an end to strife and conflict between them. This failed, and Nongoma was destroyed in 1888 by the uSuthu.

I hitched a ride to Nongoma with the multicultural talent, bussed in courtesy of Glen Mashinini, a leading light of the Durban Playhouse. Glen, one of the first people I met in Durban, let me know about the event and encouraged me to tag along—provided, he said, that I wear the proper attire, meaning a grass skirt and perhaps a couple of ropes of beads to cover a couple of private parts. Of course, he was teasing. We both chuckled at the thought of me parading before the king, who according to custom has the right to pick a new bride from the flock of nubile young women.

On the ride to Nongoma, I mulled over a thought that enters my mind whenever I travel in Zululand, which forms the northeastern part of KwaZulu-Natal, embracing an area from the Tugela River mouth in the south, along the eastern coast line north to the Mozambique border and inland to Vryheid in the west. The thought is this: I understand why so many people — the British, the Boers, the Zulus — battled to make this land their own. The rolling hills, grassy plains, forests, rivers and valleys of Zululand are so beautiful they make you want to cry.

Travel to Nongoma was smooth and fairly straightforward—that is, until we reached the turnoff for the Enoykeni Palace. From the highway to the palace is 10 miles of corrugated dirt road. We bumped along, jiggling in our seats; I felt as if my derriere was strapped to one of those exercise machines designed to shake off body fat. I wondered to myself, "if the King can't get a paved road, who can?"

The Reed Dance was scheduled to kick off at 8:30 a.m. However, we arrived at close to 11 a.m. and only a few people sat in the area set

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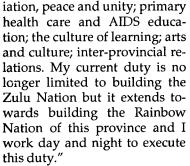
A princess from the Royal House takes a break from organizing "maidens" and poses for the camera. Below, Zulu maidens wear beaded neck ornaments and hip belts, while the white teen-agers wear costume skirts and halter tops. up for dignitaries and guests. Since arriving here, I've learned that there's such a thing as Indian time and African time. Indian time means the event starts about a half hour to 45 minutes behind schedule. African time... well, let me put it this way: It happens when it happens.

The day was incredibly hot and dusty; the land parched, with not a tree in sight. (Trees don't stand a chance here, as 38 percent of blacks nationwide rely on wood as their main source of energy for cooking.) A few of us standing around, waiting for things to happen, began introducing ourselves and exchanging pleasantries. That's when the whispers started: "Maybe no one will show up now that the king and his uncle don't get along anymore." "Maybe people are worried that there'll be violence."

In past years, the Reed Dance ceremony has been organized by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), whose leader, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, revived the tradition in 1984. However, Buthelezi and Zwelithini are at odds with one another, to put it mildly. Not long after the April 1994 elections, the king "divorced" his uncle, so to speak. Now he is perceived as "in bed" with the African National Congress (ANC), though Zwelithini insists that he does not pledge allegiance to either the IFP or the ANC.

An estimated 1,000 Zulu maidens took part in the ritual, which included a virginity check. The white, colored and Indian girls were not obliged to take the test. Neither were they subjected to bathing in a nearby ravine, which the Zulu maidens did the morning of the dance. What's more, the king made clear that he had no intention of choosing a marriage partner — Zulu or non-Zulu.

"From now on," Zwelithini said in his address, "I desire that the Reed Dance ceremony should become a forum that will promote chastity of all maidens in this province; cultural awareness; nation building; reconcil-



Taken at face value, the king's address sounded politically correct. It affirmed and underlined the need to create unity among the diverse ethnic, racial and regional groups in this province. Needless to say, South Africa remains ethnically and racially fragmented, a situation that makes nation-building and, by extension, the building of a



national identity extremely difficult. So any message that evaporates divisiveness, and instead fosters unity would seem welcome. However, things never are as they seem here. That the king hosted the Reed Dance, without the blessing or participation of the IFP/ Buthelezi, was considered a political act. That he chose to include young women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds — a historic first — was seen as a political decision. Culture is politics here, and politics is culture. Ethnicity, too, is often politicized. Take the Shaka Day celebrations on Sept. 24 and 25 as another example.

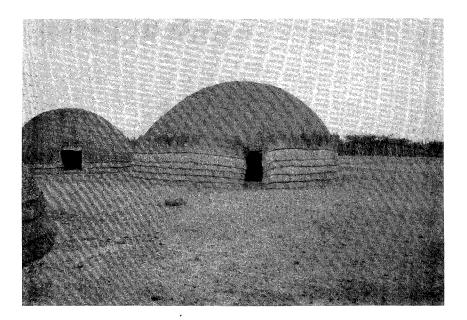
The king announced on Sept. 7 that there would be no official Shaka Day observance this year because the IFP uses the day as a political event. He said the IFP has used the day to broaden its political base and manipulate the Zulu nation into the politics of ethnicity. Instead, the king believes the day should be used to promote unity between different cultural, racial and political groups. Despite the monarch's opposition, the IFP-led provincial cabinet approved the event. It went ahead as planned, albeit with a massive security force presence to prevent political clashes.

The origin of the Reed Dance is unclear. One account has it that the Zulus imported the custom from the King of Swaziland. There, the *Umhlanga*, or Reed Dance, traditionally has been performed by young girls summoned to cut reeds and to prepare the windscreen of the Queen Mother's hut, signifying their coming of age. The Zulu version has to do with the birth of man, who supposedly sprang from a bed of reeds (*umhlanga*), though yet another explanation says Zulu maidens dancing before the king symbolize the fertility or purity of the nation's women. How any of these versions translate into the king picking a bride, I have yet to discover.

The conflicting versions led me to the local Don Africana library, where a tall, gangly librarian helped me. Without doing a computer search, he disappeared into a back room and returned with five books on Zulu and Swazi culture. He told me that the origin of the Reed Dance has been a bone of contention between two library staff members, one of whom is Zulu and one of whom is Swazi. Both lay claim to the custom for their respective ethnic groups and, according to the mouthy librarian, neither of the two has been successful in finding a definitive answer to the mystery.

My search also failed to produce a definitive answer but in my view culture doesn't require strict definition. To the contrary, I liken culture to the soft colorful clay that my 5-year-old niece uses to create the imaginings and images in her fertile, inventive mind. She takes a glob here, there, and stretches and molds it over and over again until she constructs something that has meaning for her. Perhaps the Reed Dance was a Swazi tradition that a Zulu king admired and decided to incorporate into customs associated with his people. Now the current king of the Zulus has decided to extend the boundaries of the custom even farther. That's the nature of culture; its boundaries are ever changing.

While flipping through the pages of a local magazine that looks at the numerous cultures and subcultures that co-exist in Durban, I happened upon this sentence: "Many of the guides to Durban bewail the fact that besides the bead sellers on the beach front, there is very little evidence of Zulu culture in the city." I twiddled my thumbs over this commentary before concluding that 1.) It does not take into consideration that Durban, for all intents and purposes, was off limits to Zulu people, except for work, up until April of 1994. 2.) Implicit in the commentary is the idea that Zulu culture fits easily between A and Z. There is seemingly no recognition that the present culture is a result of refinement, of many profound influences and changes. Do the guides expect to see Zulus living in beehive huts of yesteryear, and dressed in skins and furs as they dash to work at a downtown



A traditional beehive hut, or umuzi (homestead), at the restored royal quarters (isigodlo) of King Cetshwayo's headquarters at Ondini (Ulundi). In 1980, the Kwa-Zulu Monuments Council initiated an archaeological investigation of Ondini. Hut floors and the remains of the outer pallisade were uncovered and the location of a cattle enclosure determined.

Woolworth's store or Standard Bank?

The commentary gave me cause to think about my second meeting with the chairman of the association that manages the apartment complex in which I live. Upon learning that I am African American (he assumed that I am Indian), he blurted, "I've always wanted to visit a black church in the American South to hear Negroes sing spirituals." I made no comment. On other occasions, individuals have asked, "Are African Americans more like people on the "Cosby" show or on "Martin?" — two widely different American comedies broadcast on television here.

Here again, there is no recognition that culture constantly reshapes itself. The Indian pastor of a Christian church in an Indian township outside of Durban was stunned to learn when I attended a service that I do not sing. "I thought all African Americans could sing," he said. Regrettably, I had to tell him otherwise. Some of us sing spirituals, some sing gospel and some poor souls like myself can't sing at all. I also informed him that we're such a diverse crowd that some of us attend Catholic churches, while others attend Pentecostal, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Unitarian. Likewise, I've met Zulus of all religious faiths — Methodists, Zionists, and Nazareth Baptists, as well as people who practice the formal ritual of worshipping ancestors.

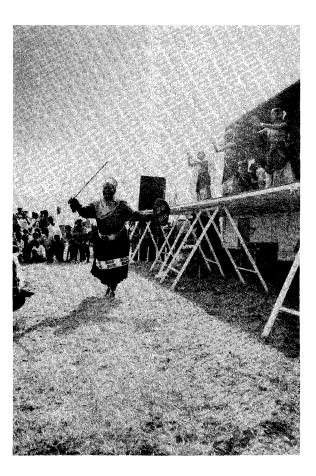
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As a racial group, I'd be hard pressed to describe physical characteristics unique to Zulu people. Granted, there's not the wide range of characteristics found in the African-American community, where at least three-quarters of native-born Americans of African descent also claim some American Indian, European, Asian or Hispanic heritage. Still, if anyone asked me to describe the physical characteristics of Zulu people, I could not. They come in all heights and weights; some are hairy, others clean shaven. Some are cinnamon colored, while others are reddish

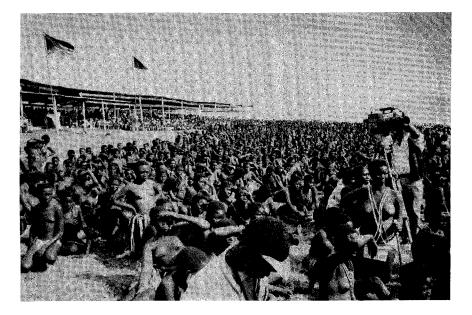
brown like the bark of the tall, scraggly Sweet-thorn tree that grows here. The diversity in skin color and physical characteristics is understandable given that the Zulu king, Shaka, united about 290 fragmented clans.

Of course, the Zulu language is the most evident symbol of community among the Zulus. But even language does not mask intense divisions between urban and rural Zulus, nor class, gender and generational differences. Zulu friends living in the city say they can tell Zulus newly arrived from rural areas because they tend to speak "deep Zulu," meaning the speakers may not communicate





Below: Zulu maidens sit beneath a blistering hot sun, watching Indian dancers perform on a portable stage supplied by the Durban playhouse. Above: an older woman wearing beaded regalia and carrying a shield shows off some of her own fancy footwork in front of the stage.



in a straightforward, linear fashion. Instead, they may talk in circles, as well as make use of riddles, symbols and allegory. (Sounds like a description of American Southerners to me.) Here's a weak example but, in commenting on the weather being extremely hot, a speaker of deep Zulu might say "*Likhipha inhlanzi emanzini*/ It's drawing the fish out of the water." Then's there tsotsi taal — street slang spoken by township youth. Some language purists worry that it may well become South Africa's unofficial 12th language given its phenomenal growth.

As an example of both gender and generational divisions among Zulus, I return to the Reed Dance. One of the women who organized the Durban talent is Zulu. As she busied herself preparing the stage, a coworker asked if she wanted to walk to the king's palace to meet him. She responded "no" and later explained that custom dictates that she must approach the king on her knees. "I'm not bowing before any man," she told me.

Again, I liken the Zulus to African-Americans, for comparison's sake. While people tend to think of African-Americans as an ethnic monolith, we are anything but that. We share a common cultural history and a collective memory, particularly of oppression and struggle. We also share certain rituals and traditions. But it's our history and our common experience of inequality that in so many ways defines our consciousness, especially our political consciousness. My point is this: I've found that Zulus are about as easily pegged as African-Americans, which is to say that the symbols used to draw boundaries around both groups are more fluid and imprecise than commonly believed. Recently, I attended the launch of a new book on the rise and fall of the Zulu nation. John Laband, a historian at the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal, chose as a title, "Rope of Sand"-words taken from an Aug. 12, 1887 memorandum by Sir Theophilus Shepstone, Britain's controversial "diplomatic agent to the native tribes" of Natal. Shepstone wrote: "The Zulu nation is a collection of tribes, more or less autonomous, and more or less discontented; a rope of sand whose only cohesive property was furnished by the presence of the Zulu ruling family and its command of a standing army."

What today binds the Zulu "nation?" First, a definition of "nation" is perhaps helpful: Yunus Carrim, a Natal midlands provincial minister for the ANC, wrote in a column that appeared in a local newspaper that nation refers to "a group of people who occupy a common territory, are economically-bound together, have an independent state, exercise political sovereignty and have a sense of belonging together. What distinguishes a nation from a racial group or ethnic group is sovereignty and statehood." The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines nation as "a community of people mainly of common descent, history, language, etc. forming a State or inhabiting a territory."

The IFP and ANC have widely different draft constitutions for the province of KwaZulu-Natal. In a nutshell, the ANC sees KwaZulu-Natal's relationship with South Africa as "inseparable." The provincial constitution shall be the supreme law in the province, subject to the provisions of the national constitution. The IFP, on the other hand, wants the "Kingdom of KwaZulu-Natal" to be a federate province of the Republic of South Africa, with "exclusive legislative competence" to provide for, among other things, a provincial militia, the right to declare a state of emergency, a constitutional monarchy, as well as provincial flags and a coat of arms. Moreover, the territory of the kingdom would be "indivisible and inalienable" and include territorial waters. Based on its draft constitution, the IFP seeks to form a "state," a community of primarily Zulus, since it is Zulus who comprise the majority in this province of 8.5 million.

To secure its political goals, the leadership of the IFP often relies on the rhetoric of ethnic solidarity to manipulate support. Ethnicity is politicized through the use of cultural symbols, such as language, customs and the Zulu monarchy, which, historian Laband points out, is "the living link with an independent and powerful colonial past." Of course, the "living link" — Zwelithini — is reconstructing fixed, politicized notions of Zulu identity and cultural integrity, as evidenced by his remarks at the Reed Dance. Needless to say, this is not acceptable to politicians who have set themselves up as the arbiters of Zuluness, which is no doubt why the IFP constitutional principles reduce the monarch to a figurehead.

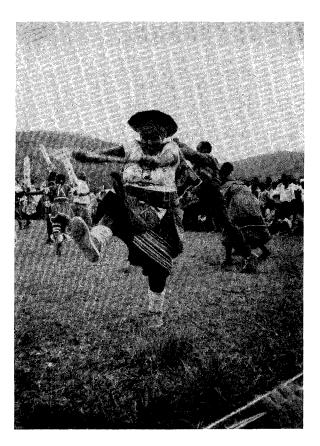
Ethnicity is real. There's no wishing it away, and ethnic consciousness, pride and unity are not necessarily negative. What's needed is for individuals to develop both an ethnic and national identity simultaneously, without one necessarily threatening the other. The Reed Dance is a good example of how people can continue to identify with their ethnic group, while at the same time open up to wider influences.

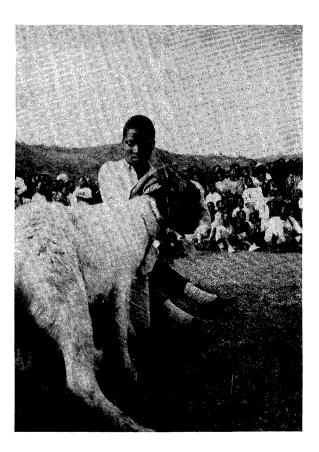
At the close of the Reed Dance ceremony, the king treated the multicultural talent to lunch. The chatty girls filed into a tent where women served savory rice, chicken, fresh fruit, salad and cold drinks. Outside the tent, near a cluster of small brick houses, were tables covered with white cloth and elegant floral arrangements. Behind each table stood young white men dressed in white jackets and black pants, ready to serve meals to, I suppose, King Zwelithini and other dignitaries. As I ate my chicken and rice, I kept looking for the Zulu maidens to join us for lunch. They never did, at least not while I was there.

Night fell before we reached the highway that leads south to Durban. As we traveled the 10 miles of dirt road that snakes to and from the palace, I couldn't help but worry about cows and goats. Cows and goats graze along the sides of roads and highways throughout KwaZulu-Natal. Most of the time an attentive



An ingoma(Zulu) dance competition held north of Durban in an area called Ndwedwe was organized to preserve and celebrate traditional forms of Zulu dance, as well as counter the influence of "Western" music and dance popularized by local television. First prize was a bull worth R3,000 (\$833); second place, a goat. I attended the dance competition with Robert Papini of the Local History Museum in Durban. The chief of the area asked him to video tape the competition in his absence. "We'll be in IFP territory," Robert told me a few days before the competition, "so if you have any strong feelings against the party, keep it to yourself." He failed to tell me that an Ndwedwe induna is on trial in Durban Supreme Court for the April 11, 1994 murder of eight pamphlet disbributors abducted while distributing voter education material on behalf of the Independent Electoral Commission. The eight were allegedly abducted by IFP-aligned residents in the area and accused of being ANC members.





herd boy is nearby to steer them clear of the road, but not always. Certainly, street lights would have helped the situation. But there were none. Darkness covered the hills and valleys like a blanket tucked tight around a sleeping child. I had observed on the ride to the palace that none of the mud houses and rondavels that dotted the dry landscape appeared to have either electricity or tap water, which is probably why the portable toilets at the Reed Dance proved so popular.

A township friend whose family once lived in Nongoma has promised on several occasions to take me to visit relatives still living there. The offer is always couched in terms of wanting to provide me with a chance to see "real" Zulu culture, as if her cultural experiences as a Zulu woman in an urban setting are not authentic, not pure. Because she continues to suggest the trip but somehow never seems to make definite plans, I asked her, " so when do we go?" She seemed shocked by the question. The expression on her face reminded me of a look I've seen on the face of children when overzealous parents overstep their bounds and announce, "here's a cookie for your imaginary friend." The child knows the friend doesn't really exist; and my friend never really expected to take me to the "imaginary" Nongoma, where cultural purity still exists.

Nevertheless, she said "we'll go, but only for a couple of days. Life is hard there. You must get up early in the morning and walk for a long way to fetch water. There's no toilet. We'll have to cook over an open fire." At that moment, I realized that the hard reality of life outweighed all other considerations. As my friend well knows, dusty roads, poor housing, lack of electricity, inadequate health care, scarce water resources (75.9 percent of rural people in KwaZulu-Natal have no access to tap water), and high unemployment are all features of life for a significant number of people in KwaZulu-Natal, particularly for people in rural areas. This truth cuts across ethnic enclaves and, indeed, links a diversity of people with similar needs and aspirations.

Current Fellows & Their Activities -

Hisham Ahmed. Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Adam Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the San Diego Union-Tribune, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

Pramila Jayapa. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

Cheng Li. An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life with a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992.[EAST ASIA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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